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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 006370

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#) [TU](#) [SYRIA](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY SUPPORTS UNIIIC MISSION, VIEWS IMPACT ON SYRIA WITH TREPIDATION

REF: DAMASCUS 5373

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

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1. (C) Turkey supports the UNIIIC investigation into the Hariri assassination and is anxiously awaiting publication of the Mehlis report. The GOT will examine the report carefully before commenting but expects it to detail direct links to high Syrian officials. Turkey is apprehensive about the potential for instability on its borders should the Baathist regime in Syria falter and sees no clear alternative to Bashar al-Assad. Turkey will continue to talk to Syria and would prefer to see U.S. policy focus on changing Syrian behavior vis-a-vis Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine rather than pursuing what it perceives as a policy of "regime change." End Summary.

Turkey will Examine Mehlis Report Carefully

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2. (C) Poloff solicited Turkish MFA views on possible developments in Syria following publication of the Mehlis report from MFA Middle East Department Head Sedat Onal on October 20. Onal began by pointing out that Turkey had contributed one staff member to the UNIIIC team and fully supported the UN investigation into the Hariri assassination. He said the MFA is convinced the UNIIIC mission sets a positive precedent in a region sorely lacking in political accountability structures and could serve as a deterrent to others contemplating destabilizing Lebanon and the broader region. He suggested the MFA was prepared for the Mehlis report to expose linkages to high Syrian officials. He said the GOT will keep a low profile on the issue, however, and refrain from commenting or making judgments until it has thoroughly examined the Mehlis report.

Turkey Supports U.S. Goals -- but with Dialogue

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3. (C) Onal stated the GOT agrees with all U.S. goals with regard to changing Syria's behavior vis-a-vis its neighbors, but insists that Turkey can best serve these goals through dialogue and quiet but firm persuasion. Turkey must look at Syria as a neighbor, and not just an unpleasant regime in the Middle East. In this regard, Turkey will continue to act cautiously and will do nothing to contribute to further instability on its borders. Acknowledging that direct pressure, such as Turkey's massing of tanks and troops on the Turkey-Syria border in 1998 to force Syria to expel PKK terrorist leader Ocalan, could also be effective, Onal cautioned that the "dosage" must be carefully modulated. He added that this was particularly important as no one can be sure what will happen if/when the current regime falls.

Focus on Changing Regime Behavior, not Regime

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4. (C) According to Onal, the region would be best served by focusing on the immediate goals, shared by the U.S. and Turkey among others, which are to get Syria to behave more constructively in Iraq, to end its support for extremists in the Palestinian territories, and to fully remove its remaining security/intelligence presence in Lebanon. He reiterated GOT concern that the U.S. is pushing for regime change in Syria and the results will be unforeseeable and likely dangerous for the region.

Comment

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5. (C) Conscious of our views on Syria, Turkey has continued low-level contacts with Damascus, including a recent visit by Syrian Deputy PM Dardari (reftel) to discuss economic cooperation, but appears to be avoiding higher-level contacts for now. The GOT will be interested in our reaction to the Mehlis report, will likely share our assessments, but may draw quite different conclusions on measures to be taken against Syria should the report clearly implicate the highest levels of the Assad regime in the Hariri assassination. End Comment.

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